

Dance Department History Project 2010-2011

Transcribed interview of Curt Holman Interviewed by Susanne Johnson Davis

My name is Curt Holman and I thought I would give a brief history of how I came to BYU, and what my responsibilities have been. As a student, I was a member of the Ballroom Dance Company, and actually I initially came to BYU because I had a great passion for theatre. However, I received a scholarship as a freshman to be a part of the Folk Dance team; I was a clogger in high school.

Then I was also involved with ballroom. I have often recounted the story to Mary Bee, because there were a series of events that meant they needed an additional person for Ballroom since the team was going to Blackpool that year, which was 1983. I went through the process and was selected to go, but I was nervous since I had a folk dance scholarship. I talked to Mary Bee about the fact that I was on scholarship and had this opportunity. She was so gracious. She told me to just go because it would be a great experience for me. That started me on the path to get involved in dance.

Shortly after I went on my mission, I came back and had a great passion for dancing. It was at that point I was no longer directed to theatre. I got a degree in the Communications Department; it was in human resource development. I graduated in 1989 with my bachelor's degree, and shortly after, I got a job at WordPerfect. I was married in 1991 to Sharon Holman, whom I met on the Ballroom Dance team. She was actually Sharon Holman's daughter. We got married and we started to pursue our pro career as ballroom dancers.

I was also asked if I would teach part time for the second tier dance company at BYU, which is the backup company in the ballroom dance division. I was working at WordPerfect in the marketing department in the western time zone, so I was working from 9-6 on the western time zone, which meant I had 7 to 9 am free. For two years, I taught on a part time basis in the ballroom dance area, just directing the formation team. At that time as well, Sharon and I competed professionally.

I was surprised—and things are different now—when I was approached by Lee Wakefield and he asked me if I would be interested in a full-time faculty position, because Emerson Lyman would be retiring soon. They were going to have the opportunity to hire someone in the ballroom dance division. It had never occurred to me that I would work and have a profession in something I loved: dance.

I was a very practical person. I knew I had to get a good degree so I could take care of my wife, pay a mortgage, etc. This request was a shock to me. It had never even occurred to me I would do this for a full-time profession. Of course, I wanted to do it, but it just never occurred to me. We spent some time thinking about it and attended the temple; we were twenty-eight at the time.

I kept thinking, "What a great opportunity."

Worst case scenario, since we were young enough, was that I would have to start afresh and I'd be fine. I was hired at the time. Elmo Randy was the dean and Phyllis Jacobsen was the chair. I was hired at the University as a full-time instructor, not a full-time faculty member.

At that point, I was told that to be a full-time faculty member, I would need to receive a graduate degree. Arrangements were made for me to teach here full-time and simultaneously get work on my grad degree. I don't think that would happen nowadays, but it did then. Incidentally, Sharon had been going to school, and got her graduate degree before me in 1994. I graduated in 1996 with my degree.

Some of my memorable teachers were Caroline, who is now one of my colleagues. She taught a composition class I enjoyed very much. Summer workshops with David Grimky, who was in modern dancing, and guest artist. I remember taking classes on aesthetics with Sandy. My thesis was on the codification on the American Dance Syllabus we use here at BYU. I received my degree, and shortly thereafter, I was hired on the professorial track. At that point, it might have been Dean Conlee, or maybe Dean Roundy. I think I was hired full-time, with Dean Conlee, as an assistant professor. At that

point, I was very much involved with Ballroom. I was teaching the upper division technique classes.

Sharon and I were married in 1991, and we were unable to have children for a long time, which offered us the opportunity to compete on an in-depth level. We probably would not have been able to do that if we had children right away. For six to seven years, we competed on the pro ballroom dance circuit, meaning twice a month we were flying somewhere to compete. We did the Latin American category and the professional cabaret category. We did very well in the cabaret category, we did keep up in the Latin American Category, but it was difficult because we didn't have the time to put in that most other dancers did. We were able to make some very good progress in our Latin American. We had great success in the cabaret category.

We danced for six years at the U.S. Championships and we would always be in the final, and often top three. The final is the top six couples, and often there were twenty-four couples who were competing. It was quite a feat to get to the top six. We gained a respect in the ballroom world. We were seen as the couple that were passed on the torch from Lee and Linda Wakefield who were cabaret dancers as well. The field we competed in was very competitive.

We received two invitations to compete in the British Championships, which is one of my and Sharon's greatest accomplishments. You cannot sign up, you have to be invited or selected to represent your country, which Sharon and I did, twice. We would have been honored to have that once, but we represented America twice. To be the only couple on the Blackpool floor is an honor that we'll take with us for the rest of our life. In fact, it's a credential we mention often because everyone in the dance world knows Blackpool and to say we were able to compete there is a very significant thing for us. We also received an invitation to participate in Holland in 1998. We competed, placing fourth in the world in cabaret, which we were thrilled with.

Shortly thereafter, we started adopting children, our first child in 1997. Our competitive career started to get smaller as our family started to expand. We adopted another little boy in 1999 and it was shortly after that we stopped competing professionally. I really believe that the experience we had competing set up a foundation for us to contribute more at the University. We had been in the professional world for so long, and we had gained a recognition in the pro field. People recognized us and our work.

So that is my journey to becoming a faculty member here. Since about 2000, almost ten years, I have obviously not done a lot of individual dancing myself. I do two kinds of work: sometimes there are individual ballroom couples, and sometimes the Latin dances.

As my responsibilities increased, I started teaching less on the side, but I always made time to choreograph and create dances for cabaret couples, and I probably had over the course of my time ten to fifteen different couples that I've been able to choreograph 100% and take on a national platform and have adjudication. In my area, that is how one assesses: how has your work been adjudicated? This is one of the rare opportunities that I've been able to have my work taken on the stage and adjudicated. The couples I've worked with have won several championships with my work.

Additional choreographic works is probably the bulk of what I do; I choreograph for the backup ballroom dance company. My role in the dance division has always been to create and prepare students to compete in the touring company. I don't have the opportunities that many dance companies do, to merely choreograph a piece in their show. That happens often for choreographers to come in and choreograph and then the director shape and mold that. I have not had that opportunity, and I would like that opportunity, but on the other hand, being here for eighteen years and being challenged with choreographing material for dancers 100% on my own has really allowed me to increase my dancing abilities far beyond being able to bring people in and choreograph stuff for me. It's been a challenge at times, because I have to stretch myself to be creative. It has been a good thing in the end and I have enjoyed it.

In 1995, I had the opportunity under Phyllis Jacobsen to take the backup team to China for about seven weeks. It was a very long, very unusual tour. In fact, it will probably never happen again.

Phyllis was very interested in having every performing group tour from the University. The one group she didn't think got that opportunity were the Cougarettes. The plan was that the Cougarettes coupled with eight couples from the backup company would put together a show and go to China. So I created a show along with Judy Maxfield that was called Dance Across the USA. It was six and a half weeks and we toured with Phyllis Jacobsen the whole time. Gary Williams was our culture advisor. It was a wonderful experience and I don't think it would happen again.

Since then, I've had five different opportunities to create shows and have them showcased in Nauvoo, Illinois. The backup team has been able to perform these dances, which has been a delightful opportunity for me. It has given me an opportunity to go out and perform beyond the limitations I have here at the university.

I became division director in 1999, and I administer the ballroom program. I do the administration of the division, budgeting, and all that would entail. It's been challenging but it's been something I've felt comfortable doing.

Our performance group is based off five different performing companies: we have placement teams, which we bring a lot of freshmen in for, and we have the performing back up company, which is what I work with.

Over my time, there was a question of how things have changed. In 1993, BYU hosted the World Amateur Dancesport Championships, which was the first time this was done in the U.S. I really see that as a marker of when things significantly changed here in the ballroom division. We moved our winter competition to the Marriott Center instead of the Wilkinson Center, we received permission to hold professional competitions, which helped gain our reputation. The competition has continued to grow since then.

One of the things that is very interesting is that much, if not all, of the success in the Utah area is linked to the BYU program. There are very few ballroom programs not linked to BYU. By linked, I'm talking about BYU alumni who have gone out and had a passion for dancing and started a program or studio. It's quite amazing to see that we have our channel of championships will have 17 teams that will participate. It is very rewarding or satisfying to see the experience students have had dancing at BYU, and sharing it with others and reaching out.

Cheryl True, who was a dancer at the same time I was in the 80's, always had a passion for ballroom dance for children. She took that passion over the course of many years and has a bonafide program among 5th and 6th graders who learn about the fundamentals of ballroom dance etiquette, and how to interact appropriately with members of the opposite sex. Recently, she was brought on full time. I look at that and think about what she's done there and how that passion, which was embraced here, propelled her to do something wonderful in the community. There have been countless stories of this happening.

At one point, there was a ballroom dance major, after going through several accreditations, that title was not necessary. We had and even advised it would strengthen our major if we consolidated, which we did. We have students who study and emphasize in ballroom dance and they are increasing the growing and educated voice in how ballroom relates to dance as a whole. I see our students coming in, and maybe students are more bright now, but they are making connections that movement is movement regardless of the genre. They get excited about how things relate.

About speeches and convocations: I hold the honor of being the last faculty member to speak at convocation in the College of Health and Human Performance, before we moved to the College of Fine Arts, which is one of the biggest changes. An example of the academic side of what we do: Giovalyn Velasquez was chosen to be the representative at the convocation last year, for the College of Fine Arts. I was able to mentor her during her senior project and then it was very rewarding to see her presenting her research at convocation. I think it shows the development of ballroom dance and moves it to an academic nature to help the community.

My contemporary faculty: I was hired the same time as Colleen West, the same as Pam Musil. I

think of Colleen as my partner faculty member, I think we were hired the same year, maybe she was slightly after me by six months. Sara Lee was the dean for the large portion of what I did. I think many faculty would agree that moving to the fine arts has been a good move. I think we've felt we have come home in many years, even though it was great. I think we actually had experienced a lot of growth in the Health and Human Performance College. I think a lot of the support we felt here helped us grow to where we are today. We received tremendous support.

It's difficult to put into words what BYU has given me. I don't think I ever came with the expectation that I would get something back. I didn't think I would *be here*. I'm forty-three, and something happens when you hit your mid-40s. You become much more wise almost overnight, but also much more aware of the path that led you to where you are. BYU has given me a way to develop myself fully as an artist, as a father, and as a member of the church. Those three things: husband/father, artist, and my membership in the church really says who I am and shapes who I have become. My life would be a little different if I had not come here, but I would certainly still be a member of the church and a father and a husband. I don't think I would have been able to develop myself as an artist as much as I have here, and that artistry, which I think is so linked to the spirit, has allowed me to become more in tune in a way that has developed me spiritually.

One thing I've been able to do is teach religion for three years. As daunting as that task was, I look back and wonder, *When I would have had an opportunity to teach religion to BYU students? When would I have had the support to create a curriculum?* Its things like that that you can't find outside the university. It is the opportunity to work with students who are the cream of the crop in all aspects, academically and spiritually.

People often ask what my favorite part of BYU is. Without thinking about it, it's the students I work with. I am continually impressed with their maturity and foresight. It seems like they get smarter and have a more solid testimonies. BYU has given me tools to help me grow as a being, academically and spiritually, and its supportive as it is church based; it supports and embraces who I am. It might sound nebulous, but it is so encompassing. I don't think I could have ever dreamed of such a wonderful opportunity at BYU.

For a long time, I have thought that if you had told me five years ago that I would be here, I wouldn't have believed you. I remember that in the early days. Now I feel like I belong here, and I'm excited to help shape things here. You realize you are now the builder and not the taker. I really have felt that shift recently that I can help shape the direction of the ballroom dance program and the department. It's a wonderful place to be because you realize it's less about you and more about what you give back. I feel like I really want to give back and keep that cycle going. I definitely feel now in 2010, there is going to be a changing of the guard in older faculty that are going to leave. It's going to be in next five years, and there goes that tier. I think I am the tier underneath and it's an interesting place to be. But I guess that's life, though.